

Seven Songs
from Ancient Mesopotamia
2500 BC to 650 BC
Written in Sumerian, Old-Babylonian, Hurrian
and Neo-Assyrian

By
Richard Dumbrill
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For Sevan, of course...

Φανερόν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς οὐ τῷ ἢ ἔμμετρα λέγειν ἢ ἄμμετρα διαφέρουσιν (εἴη γὰρ ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἦτον ἂν εἴη ἱστορία τις μετὰ μέτρου ἢ ἄνευ μέτρου)• ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ἱστορίας ἐστίν•

“The historian relates of events that have happened and the poet relates of events that might have happened. Hence poetry is much more philosophical than history¹.”

Aristotle, *De Poetica*, 1451B1-6²

I never intended to compose these pieces as I think they may have sounded some millennia ago, in the Ancient Near East. I leave this gymnopaedia to my learned Hellenist colleagues who have recently dictated the world that their rendition of Ancient Greek lyrics and music was one hundred per cent accurate³. Notwithstanding, my present compositions were gracefully shielded by my muse, under Plato's *Apology* [...] *ἔοικα γοῦν τούτου γε μικρῷ τινι αὐτῷ τούτῳ σοφώτερος εἶναι, ὅτι ἂ μὴ οἶδα οὐδὲ οἶμαι εἰδέναι*, or: [...] I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either⁴. I know what I like: my love for Sumerian-Babylonian poetic lore and secondly my enlightenment of it through Sevan's acroasis⁵. This erected my Orphic unconscious into frenetic creativeness. Therefore I cannot beg merit for any of it.

1 <https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2015/11/03/aristotle-poetics-1451b1-6-poetry-is-better-than-history-and-more-philosophical/>

Last accessed on 26/08/2019.

2 My abridgement of the translation.

3 According to OPEN CULTURE, (2019) between 750 BC and 400 BC, the Ancient Greeks composed songs meant to be accompanied by the lyre, reed-pipes, and various percussion instruments. More than 2,000 years later, modern scholars have finally figured out how to reconstruct and perform these songs with 100% accuracy. Writing on the BBC web site, Armand D'Angour, a musician and tutor in classics at Oxford University, notes: [Ancient Greek] instruments are known from descriptions, paintings and archaeological remains, which allow us to establish the timbres and range of pitches they produced. And now, new revelations about ancient Greek music have emerged from a few dozen ancient documents inscribed with a vocal notation devised around 450 BC, consisting of alphabetic letters and signs placed above the vowels of the Greek words. The Greeks had worked out the mathematical ratios of musical intervals - an octave is 2:1, a fifth 3:2, a fourth 4:3, and so on. The notation gives an accurate indication of relative pitch. So what did Greek music sound like? Below you can listen to David Creese, a classicist from the University of Newcastle, playing 'an ancient Greek song taken from stone inscriptions constructed on an eight-string 'canon' (a zither-like instrument) with movable bridges. 'The tune is credited to Seikilos' says Archaeology Magazine.

4 From Henry Cary's literal translation of 1897.

5 From Ancient Greek *ἀκρόασις* (akróasis, “hearing”), from *ἀκροάομαι* (akroáomai, “listen”).

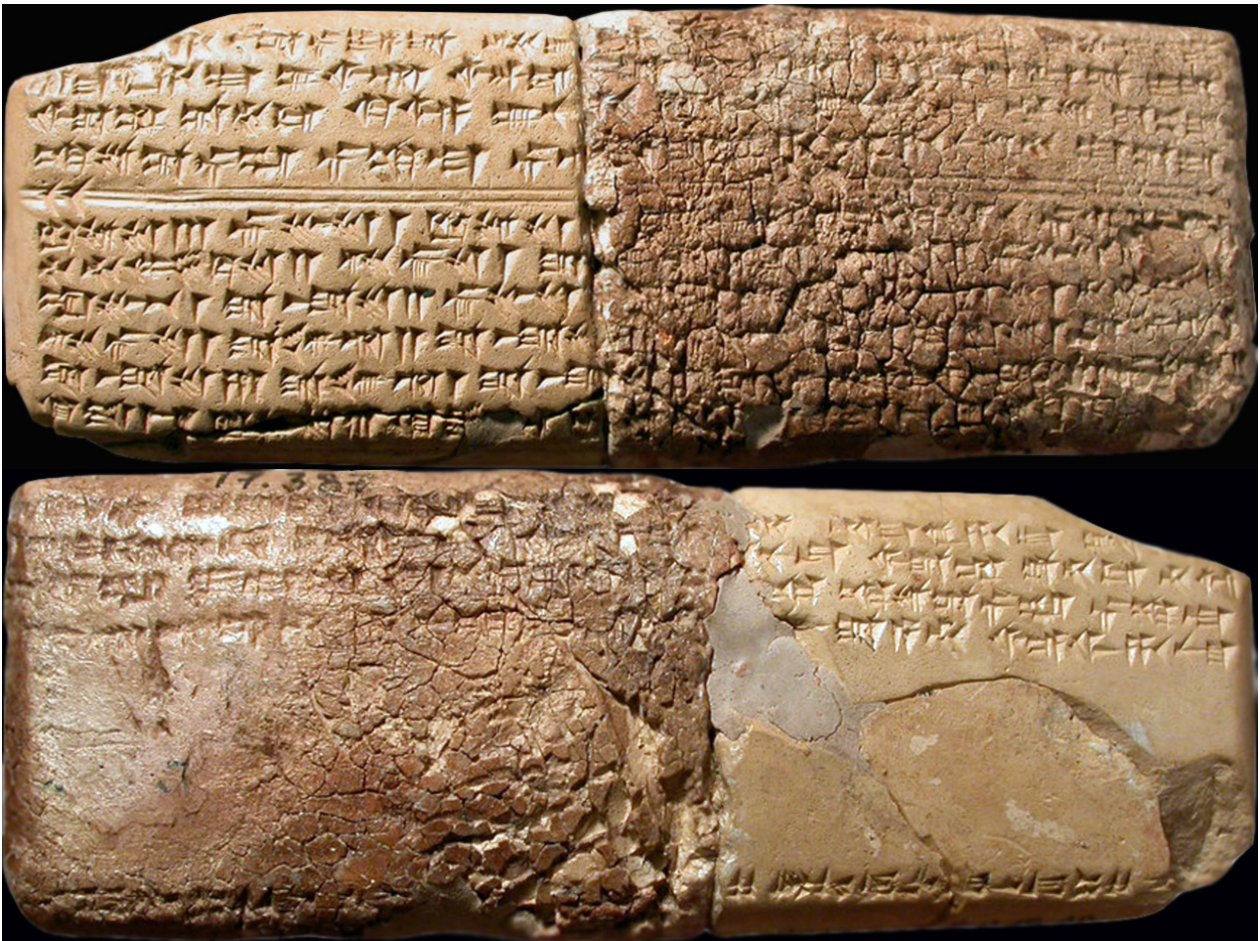
Hurrian song H6

The clay tablet is kept at the Museum of Damascus under the numbers (R 13.30 + 15.49 + 17.387) as it was reconstructed from three fragments. It is part of a collection of 29 cuneiform tablets unearthed during the pre and post war Missions at Ras Shamra in North-West Syria, conducted by the French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer. The tablets are written in Hurrian, unrelated to Semitic languages, with Babylonian signs. The scribes who wrote these texts were native Babylonian speakers, accounting for their usage of Hurrianised Babylonian.

The colophon of tablet H6 is unequivocal. It is a song in the scale of *nidqibli a zaluzi* for the gods, written by *Urthiya* and composed by *Ammurabi*?. It does not say that this melody should be sang to the accompaniment of any instrument.

This song is about a childless young woman. She begs goddess Nikkal to make her fertile and gives her offerings of sesame...

This is my own musical interpretation of the text. Some scholars have produced different interpretations based, however, on the unlikely premise that this text, which is about 3,600 years old was written in consonantal harmony, a system which appeared in about 1200 AD, at the School of Notre Dame in Paris, some 2400 years later...



Photograph of the reverse and obverse of the tablet.

Hurrian Song H6

Tapshirun, Pukhiyanna, Urkhiya or Ammiya
ca 1300BC

Translated by Richard Dumbrill, 1998 AD

$\text{♩} = 100$

The musical score consists of seven staves of music. The first staff is in 7/8 time and ends with a repeat sign. The second staff is in 3/8 time and includes the lyrics: kha nu ta ni ya sha zi u we shi nu te zu tu ri-i-a u bu ga ra kab shi li u mu gal a ka li sham sham me tu li il uk uk al. The third staff is in 3/8 time and includes the lyrics: ku dur ni ta shal ki il la zi il lishi i i i pri khu ma ru khat u wa ri tu u nu ni ta kha nu ka kali tanil ni i ka a la ni i khu ra sha a al. The fourth staff is in 3/8 time and includes the lyrics: wad ni ta u ku ri ku ur ku-ur-kur-ta i sha la u la li kab gi a liu gi kha an na kha nu ti a ta ya ash sha al a a ta a ri ta a ti. The fifth staff is in 3/8 time and includes the lyrics: shi ir it mu u ru we e shal ta a tib ti shi a u nu ga kha nu ka sha a ti we e we sha a ti we e we kha nu ku. The sixth staff is in 3/8 time. The seventh staff is in 3/8 time and ends with a repeat sign.

kha nu ta ni ya sha zi u we shi nu te zu tu ri-i-a u bu ga ra
kab shi li u mu gal a ka li sham sham me tu li il uk uk al

ku dur ni ta shal ki il la zi il lishi i i i pri khu ma ru khat u wa ri
tu u nu ni ta kha nu ka kali tanil ni i ka a la ni i khu ra sha a al

wad ni ta u ku ri ku ur ku-ur-kur-ta i sha la u la li kab gi a liu gi
kha an na kha nu ti a ta ya ash sha al a a ta a ri ta a ti

shi ir it mu u ru we e shal ta a tib ti shi a u nu ga
kha nu ka sha a ti we e we sha a ti we e we kha nu ku

Shigar Shami

Anonymous Old Babylonian Poet

Musical adaptation by Richard Dumbrill, 2019 AD

$\text{♩} = 60$ Shehnaz

shi gar sha mi rab il li ti sha mi shi gar sha mi rab il li tisha mi

2 Sha mash mu kil nap shat ma tim ma a tim a khishar rim

4 ni i shi gi E a i li eb bum naq rum ez zu er bu ni kas ap sim

5 in A nun na ki a sha re e dum et lu tam id dish sum

6 akh khum kab tum ez zum e eq lum zu du si sha la li Zi im bir

8 a na li bi i shad dad ish shar Sha a mash sha la li Zi im bir

9 a na li bi i shad dad ish shar zu du si Sha a mash ZA A MI

Iltam Zumra

There are very few Old Babylonian Lyrical texts which have reached us. The present song has been fully preserved and is composed of fourteen strophes of four verses each. The last four verses are a prayer to *Ammiditana*, the ninth king of the first Babylonian Dynasty. It ends by two verses written in Sumerian: *giš.gi₄. gál* which is the equation of Akkadian *miḥru*, meaning antiphony.

The tablet is preserved at the Louvre in Paris under number AO 4479. For a complete publication of this text with transliteration and translation, see: UN HYMNE À IŠTAR DE LA HAUTE ÉPOQUE BABYLONIENNE, by F. Thureau-Dangin, in *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* Vol. 22, No.4 (1925), pp 169-77. Presses Universitaires de France.

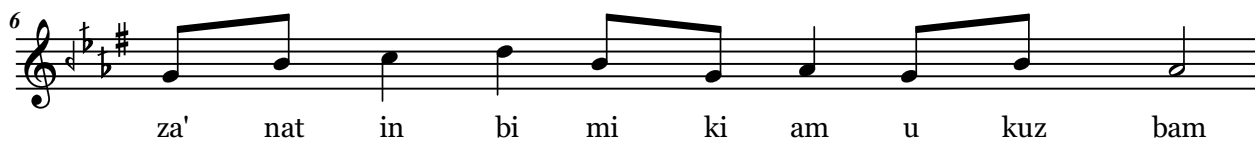
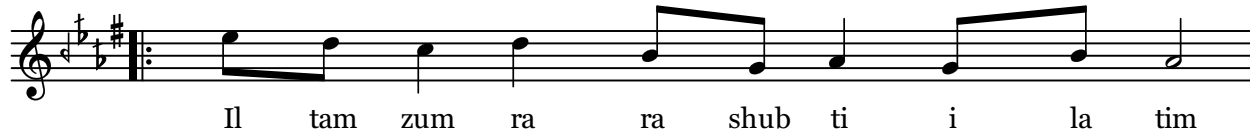
I have composed music for the first three strophes and for the last. There is no evidence that this text was accompanied by any instrument and therefore it is sung a capella.

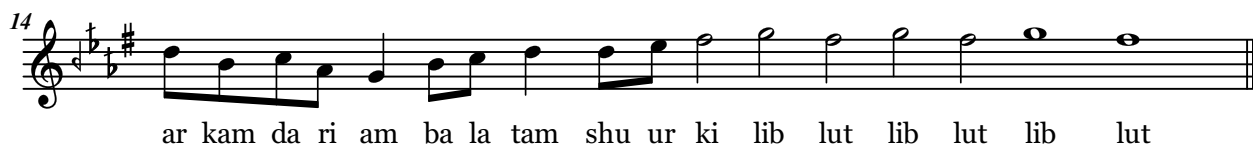
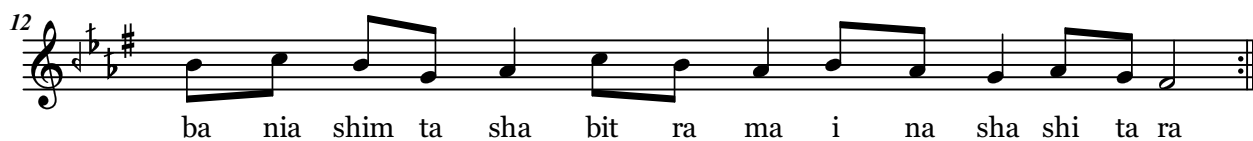
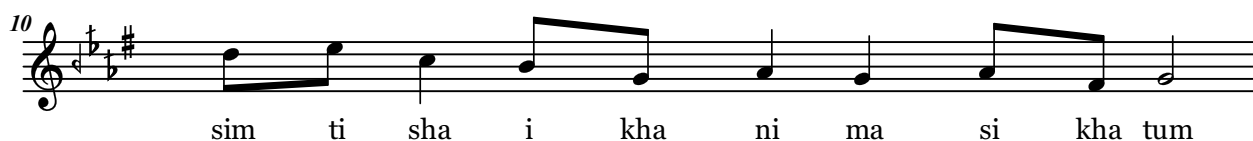
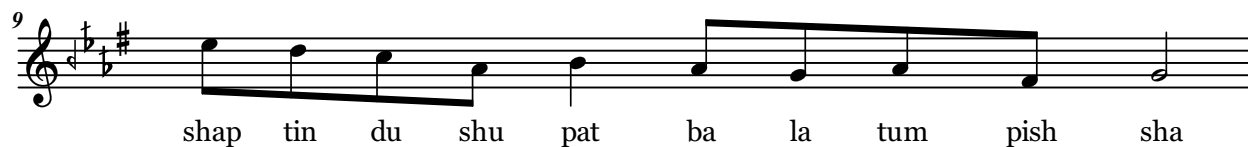
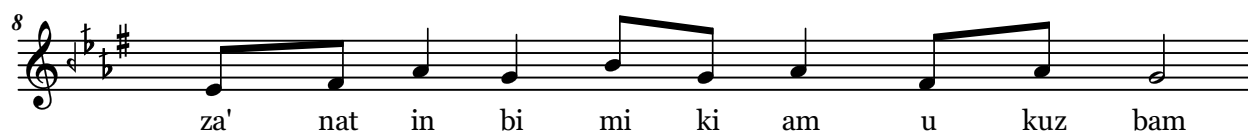
Iltam Zumra

Anonymous Old Babylonian, ca. 1800 BC

Musical adaptation, Richard Dumbrill, 2019 AD

♩ = 80 Suzinak Zirgule





This is a Wisdom Song From Niniveh. This version is after W.G Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, pp. 102-3, 11.70-80. The text warns young men not to marry prostitutes...

Assyrian Wisdom Song

Anonymous Assyrian poet, ca. 700 BC

Musical adaptation by Richard Dumbrill 2019 AD

♩ = 90 Bayati-araban



i na pi ni i shi ka ma ki am liq bu ka ki am liq bu ka

2
ki am liq bu ka a a a a a a a a ki a liq bu ka

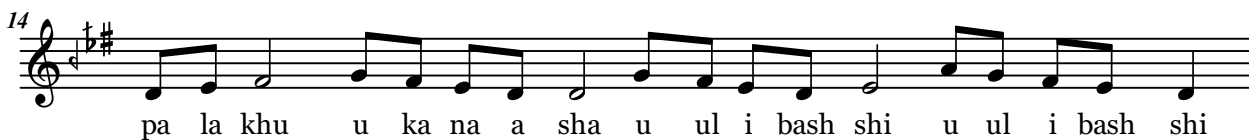
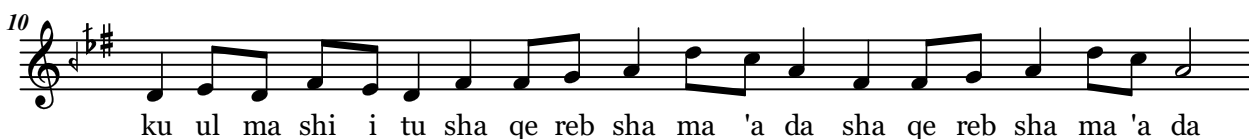
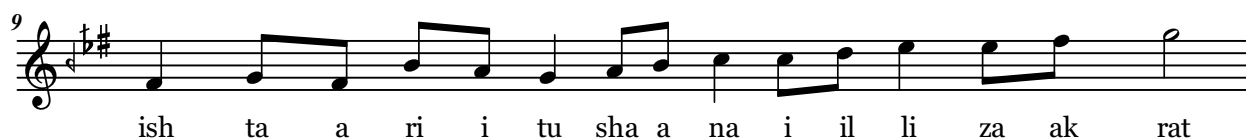
3
bit am tum ma i bel i sa pukh i sa pukh i sa pukh i sa pukh

4
i na pi ni i shi ka ma ki am liq bu ka ki am liq bu ka

5
ki am liq bu ka a a a a a a a a ki am liq bu ka

6
e ta khuz kha rim tu sha sha ri mu tu sha mu tu sha

7
mu tu sha i na pi ni i shi ka ma ki am liq bu ka



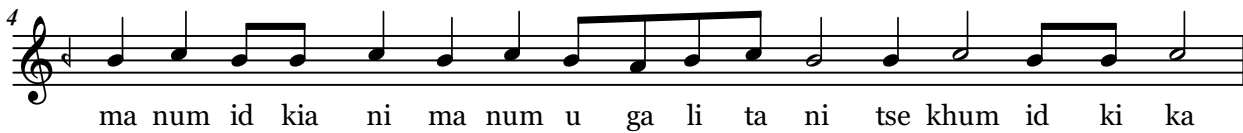


Tsekhum washib bit ekletim

Anonymous Old Babylonian, ca. 1800 BC

Tentative Reconstruction by Richard Dumbrill 2019 AD

♩ = 80 Bayati



An Old-Babylonian Lullaby



BM 122691

1. *še-eḫ-ru-um wa-ši-ib bi-it ek-[le-tim]*
2. *lu ta-ta-ša-am ta-ta-ma-ar n[u-ur ^dŠamšim]*
3. *a-mi-in ta-ba-ki a-mi-in tu-g[a²-ag ?]*
4. *ul-li-ki-a a-mi-in la ta-ab-[ki]*
5. *ì-lí bi-tim te-ed-ki ku-sa-ri[k]u-u[m] i-gi-il-TIM*
6. *ma-nu-um id-ki-a-ni*
7. *ma-nu-um ú-ga-li-ta-ni*
8. *še-eḫ-ru-um id-ki-ka še-eḫ-ru-um ú-ga-li-it-ka*
9. *ki-ma ša-tu-ù ka-ra-ni-im*
10. *ki-ma ma-ar sà-bi-tim*
11. *li-im qù-ta-šum ši-tum*
12. *ši-íp-tum ša še-eḫ-ri-im nu-úḫ-ḫi-im*

Loosely translating as: Little baby in the dark house, you have seen the sun rise. Why are you crying, why are you screaming? You have disturbed the house god. ‘Who has disturbed’ me says the house god. It is the baby who has disturbed you. ‘Who scared me’ says the house god. The baby has disturbed you, the baby has scared you, making noises like a drunkard who cannot sit still on his stool. He has disturbed your sleep. ‘Call the baby now’ says the house god.

Ludlul Bel Nemeqi

Tabu-utul-Bel, Nippur, ca. 2000BC

Musical adaptation Richard Dumbrill, 2019 AD

♩ = 50

The musical score is written on seven staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 50. Each staff begins with a measure rest and a repeat sign. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words underlined. The music is a single melodic line with a long, sweeping phrase that spans the entire piece, indicated by a large slur at the top. The lyrics are in Akkadian, and the music is a musical adaptation by Richard Dumbrill, 2019 AD.

ak shud ma a na ba lat a da na i tiq

a sa khur ma le mun le mun ma

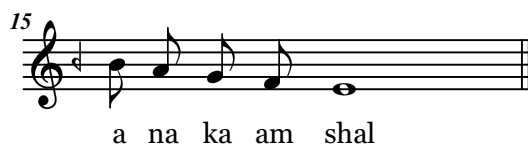
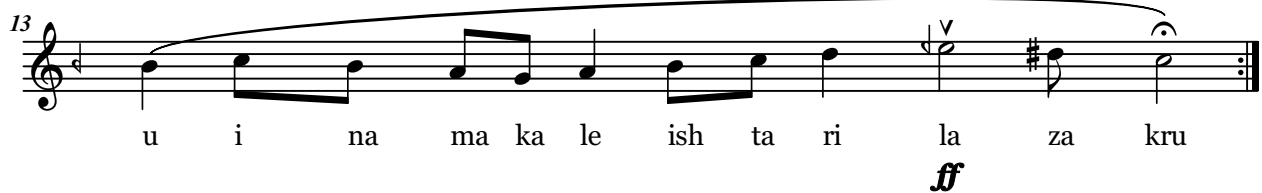
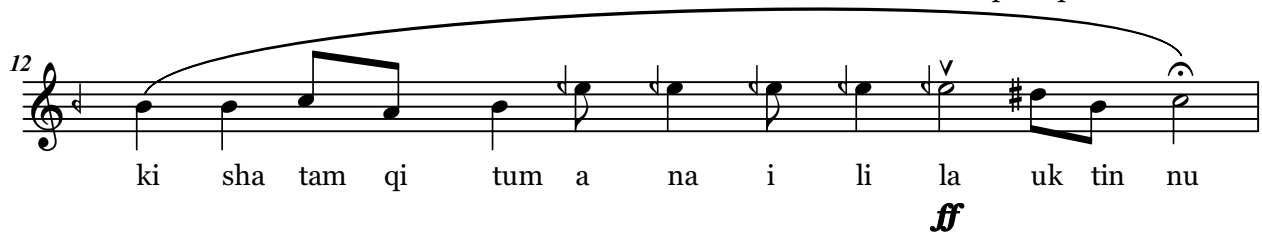
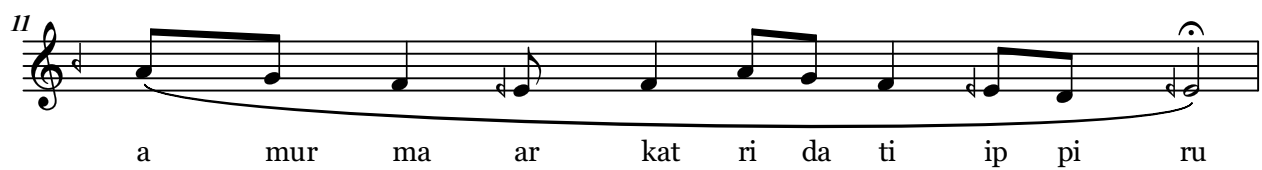
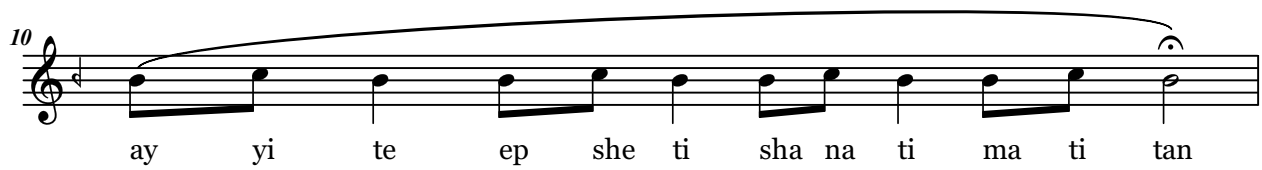
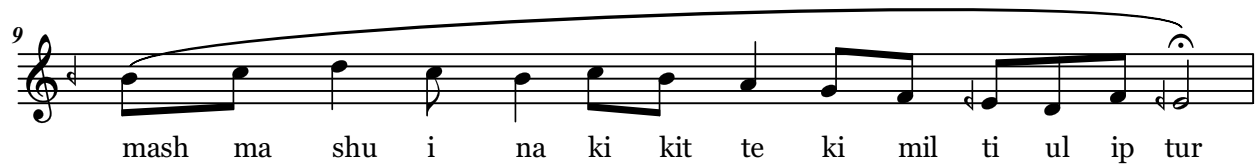
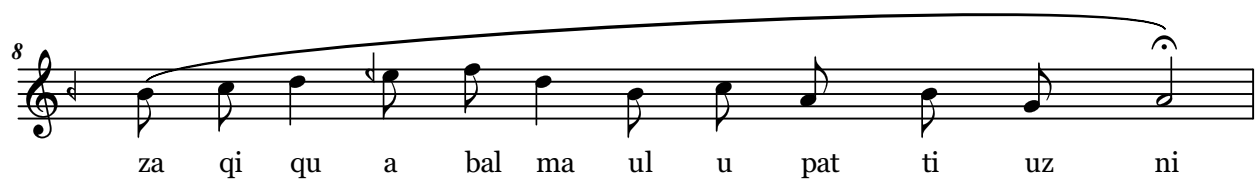
za pur ti u ta tas pa i shar ti ul ut tu

i la al sim ul id di na pa ni su

u sal li ish ta ri ul u sha qa re shi sha

ba ru i na bir ar kat ul ip rus

i na mash shak ka sha ' i lu ul u sha pi di ni



The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (Ludlul bēl nēmeqi), Tablet II

By kind permission of Professor B. R. Foster, the translation below is taken from his work *Before the Muses: an Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 2005), with minor modifications (most of which follow the translation of W. G. Lambert).

The transcription is based on the transliteration provided in the editio princeps by W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960 repr. Winona Lake, 1996), with minor modifications.

I have used only verses one to thirteen and conclude with verse 22a:

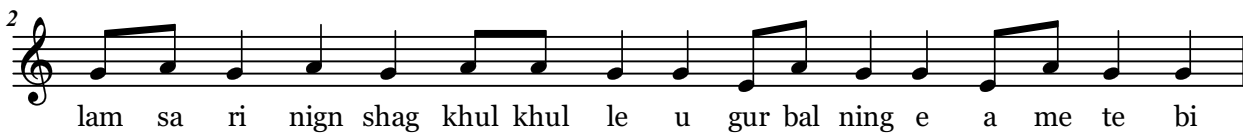
- 1 I survived to the next year, the appointed time passed
- 2 As I turned around, it was more and more terrible;
- 3 My ill luck was on the increase, I could find no good fortune.
- 4 I called to my god, but he did not show me his face.
- 5 I prayed to my goddess, but she did not raise her head.
- 6 The diviner with his inspection did not get to the bottom of it.
- 7 Nor did the dream priest with his incense clear up my case.
- 8 I beseeched a dream spirit, but it did not enlighten me.
- 9 And the incantation priest with his ritual did not appease the divine wrath against me.
- 10 What bizarre actions there were everywhere!
- 11 I looked behind, there was persecution, trouble.
- 12 Like one who has not made libations to his god,
- 13 nor with a food offering invoked his goddess.
- 22a Like such a one did I seem!

GAKKULE GAKKULE Drinking song

Anonymous drunken Sumerian poet, ca. 2600BC

Musical adaptation by Richard Dumbrill, 2019 AD

♩ = 100 Natural intonation



To finish, repeat ad libitum



Gakkule, Gakkule, A drinking song

Lines 1-9. The **gakkul** vat, the **gakkul** vat! The **gakkul** vat, the **lamsare** vat! The **gakkul** vat, which puts us in a happy mood! The **lamsare** vat, which makes the heart rejoice! The **ugurbal** jar, glory of the house! The **šaggub** jar, filled with beer! The **amam** jar, which carries the beer from the **lamsare** vat! The troughs made with bur grass and the pails for kneading the dough! All the beautiful vessels are ready on their pot stands!

Lines 10-20. May the heart of your god be well disposed towards you! Let the eye of the **gakkul** vat be our eye, and let the heart of the **gakkul** vat be our heart! What makes your heart feel wonderful in itself also makes our hearts feel wonderful in themselves! We are in a happy mood, our hearts are joyful! You have poured a libation over the fated brick, and you have laid the foundations in peace and prosperity -- now may **Ninkasi** dwell with you! She should pour beer and wine for you! Let the pouring of the sweet liquor resound pleasantly for you!

Lines 21-31. In the troughs made with bur grass, there is sweet beer. I will have the cupbearers, the boys and the brewers stand by. As I spin around the lake of beer, while feeling wonderful, feeling wonderful, while drinking beer, in a blissful mood, while drinking alcohol and feeling exhilarated, with joy in the heart and a contented liver -- my heart is a heart filled with joy! I clothe my contented liver in a garment fit for a queen! The heart of **Inana** is happy once again; the heart of **Inana** is happy once again!

Line 32. A to **Ninkasi**.

I have has only used the six first lines and end repeating the first line: **Gakkule, gakkule!**

Sources: ETCSLtransliteration : c.5.5.a; print sources: Civil 1964: composite text, translation, commentary. Electronic sources: Krecher 1996a: composite text, translation: Cuneiform sources: AO 5385 (TCL 15 20) Ni 4569 iii 24'ff. (ISET 1 60f). VAT 6705 (VAS 10 156) <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.5.5.a&display=Crit&charenc=gcirc#> A drinking song

